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Reagan ponders a bigger role in Central America

The new, broad review of U.S. policy in Central America is based on a determination to prevent a triumph by leftist insurgents in El Salvador or anywhere else in the area, sources say.

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WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration is approaching some crucial decisions that could widen American involvement in the war in El Salvador and in the anti-leftist effort throughout Central America, according to high-level administration officials.

President Reagan and his top advisers are in the midst of their broadest review of U.S. policy in that region. Informed government officials say the major options before them include:

- More aid and military advisers for El Salvador in that nation's continuing war against guerrilla forces, and the bringing of more Salvadoran troops to this country for training. Last week, the White House announced that the number of advisers would be increased to the self-imposed limit of 55.

- The assignment of American advisers for the first time to El Salvador combat zones, but with orders not to engage in the fighting.

- More money for the covert U.S. operation against Nicaragua, where the Sandinista revolutionary regime is transshipping arms from Cuba to the Salvadoran guerrillas. The money, supposedly for use in interrupting the flow of Cuban weaponry, would go to the anti-Sandinista forces fighting against the Nicaraguan government.

- More military aid and, possibly, some U.S. advisers for Guatemala, which has its own problem with insurgents, and additional aid for Honduras, which is worried about a Nicaraguan buildup on its border.

This rundown of proposals before Reagan and high-ranking members of his administration was obtained through interviews with government officials and military officers, as well as from the testimony of administration witnesses before congressional panels.

Reagan met late last week in California with Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and Secretary of State George P. Shultz for an update on the five-week-old review. Larry Speakes, White House deputy press secretary, warned reporters "not to look for a decision" about El Salvador immediately.

Some administration sources said the review of U.S. policy was based on a determination to prevent a triumph by the leftist insurgents in El Salvador or anywhere in Central America because of that region's strategic importance to the United States.

Critics of U.S. policy fear, despite administration denials, that the nation is witnessing the birth of a new Vietnam. But even some officials who shudder at the Vietnam analogy say that El Salvador is more important to the United States than Vietnam ever was and that Americans should be prepared to defend it from a leftist takeover.

"We understand the concern of those who remember the specter of Vietnam that the war in El Salvador is being 'Americanized,'" said Nestor Sanchez, deputy assistant secretary of defense for inter-American affairs. "But Vietnam was 10,000 miles away, and El Salvador is a contiguous region right at our doorstep. I won-

der how many of us stop to consider that San Salvador is closer to Washington, D.C., than is San Francisco, California."

Administration aides have informally nominated Kirkpatrick, Sanchez, Weinberger and Clark as the hard-liners pushing for a wider U.S. military involvement in the region. They classify Enders and Shultz as relative moderates who agree that more military aid is needed but that El Salvador must be encouraged or pressured into social, economic and political reforms in order to create a climate for reconciliation with the left.

The specific proposals submitted for the review remain classified, but congressional documents and interviews with U.S. officials give this country-by-country picture of some of them:

NICARAGUA

Congressional sources say a major part of the presidential review is a new look at the "secret war" against Nicaragua because it is not achieving its purpose of halting the flow of Nicaraguan arms to the Salvadoran rebels. "Tons and tons of munitions are being flown in from Nicaragua," Enders told Congress. CIA Director William Casey reportedly has proposed increasing the funds for the operation, and perhaps widening its scope to deal with the flow of air supplies. Capitol Hill sources say he may have asked to double or triple the amount of U.S. funds for the anti-Sandinista guerrillas. Last year the United States spent between \$1.5 million and \$3 million for such aid.

Last month, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.) asked Shultz if the administration would still comply with congressional restrictions on the covert operation, and Shultz replied: "Yes, sir, without reservations." Those restrictions preclude overthrowing the Nicaraguan government or provoking a war between Nicaragua and Honduras.

EL SALVADOR

Last year, the administration requested \$61.3 million in military funds for El Salvador, but Congress slashed the amount to \$26.3 million. Weinberger told Congress three weeks ago that \$60 million more should be spent to help El Salvador buy more ammunition, combat helicopters and communications gear.

HONDURAS

The administration is seeking at least \$1 million more in military aid for Honduras this year for additional transportation and communications gear to counteract the Nicaraguan military buildup. There now are about 100 U.S. military advisers in Honduras.